PROBLEMS WITH THE CENSUS CONCEPTION OF ETHNIC GROUP: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

From the perspective of social anthropology, this paper examines the collection and analysis of census data on ethnic group membership. It identifies a fundamental problem lying in the census's attempt to enumerate a subjective identity. The problem is seen as exacerbated by allowing census respondents to report membership in more than one ethnic group. This not only contradicts the census's own definition of ethnic group, and steers respondents toward a racial conception of ethnicity, but involves the census in the arbitrary re-allocation of respondent's answers. The paper then reviews two influential social science analyses of census data on ethnic group membership and finds that the analysts concerned impose their own quite different definitions of ethnic groups onto the data. It is concluded that the whole process of collecting and analysing census data of ethnic group membership is subjective and arbitrary from start to finish.

The subject of this paper is the collection and analysis of national census data on ethnic group membership. This is not a subject that anthropologists have traditionally shown much interest in, but for those of us who are interested in the role of ethnicity in modern society attention to it is being forced upon us. This is because non-anthropologists with their own conceptions of ethnicity are, on the basis of census data, making authoritative statements about it. It is time, therefore, that we took a critical look at what is being said.

In this paper I review two recent discussions of socio-economic disparity between 'Maori' and 'non-Maori'. Both studies are based on

the analysis of the same census data, but they arrive at strikingly different conclusions. One proposes that ethnicity is a determinant of socio-economic performance; the other rejects this idea. The difference is important because both authors are influential: one in the arena of public opinion, having published in both the academic and popular media (Gould, 1990a; 1990b); the other having direct influence on social policy.[1] It is important, therefore, to explain their differences. But first we need to look at how data on ethnic group membership is collected in the census.

THE COLLECTION OF CENSUS DATA ON ETHNIC GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Statistics New Zealand uses self-identification as the basis for enumerating ethnic group membership. Census respondents are asked to choose from a number of options which ethnic group they belong to.[2] The problem is we cannot know what respondents understand by `ethnic group membership' when they make their responses. Some may think of ethnic group membership strictly in terms of ancestry or descent. Others may have a broader conception, incorporating ideas about shared culture, physical appearance, and history. But the truth is we do not know, and this makes 'ethnic group membership', as it appears in census reports, an empty category; one that can be filled with whatever meaning the analyst of that data chooses. And as we will see, different analysts fill it with different meanings.

Another problem is that since 1989 the census has allowed respondents to report themselves as belonging to one or more ethnic groups. In 1996, for example, respondents were asked to 'Tick as many circles as you need to show which ethnic group(s) you belong to'.[3] The question implies that ethnic group membership can be multiple, and it encourages people to respond accordingly. The result was that 11.21 per cent of all respondents reported membership in two `ethnic groups', 3.62 per cent reported membership in three, and nearly half of all respondents reporting membership of 'the Maori ethnic group' reported membership in at least one other (Gould 2000: 16). In analysing these Maori responses, Statistics New Zealand created two further categories: 'Sole Maori' and 'Mixed Maori'. The

first was composed of those who ticked only the 'Maori' option; the latter included all those who ticked the 'Maori' option together with one or more other options. It then combined these two categories into a total 'Maori Ethnic Group', and it is the characteristics of this total group that are normally used in official statistical measurements of socio-economic disparity between Maori and non-Maori.

In the first of the two studies to be reviewed here, Emeritus Professor of economic history J.D. Gould points out that the census procedure of allocating all 'Mixed Maori' to 'the Maori Ethnic Group' greatly inflates the size of that group, as there may be many in the 'Mixed Maori' category who, if they had been allowed to soo themselves, might have allocated themselves differently. More importantly for the measurement of socio-economic disparities, the allocation of all `Mixed Maori' to 'the Maori Ethnic Group' greatly inflates the measure of Maori socio-economic performance, as the 'Mixed Maori' category scores higher on indicators of socio-economic performance than does the 'Sole Maori' category (Gould, 2000:12-13). The problem as Gould sees it lies in Statistics New Zealand's prioritisation of 'Maori' over other ethnic identities when allocating the 'Mixed Maori' category, and he proposes various alternatives (see pp.14-15), The problem as I see it is more fundamental than this: it lies in the very notion of 'mixed ethnicity' and the conception of ethnic group that underlies it.

THE CENSUS CONCEPTION OF ETHNIC GROUP

In the course of developing its Classification of Ethnicity in New Zealand the Department of Statistics (1993:15) adopted, 'to most usefully reflect the contemporary nature of ethnicity in New Zealand', the definition of ethnic group given by the British historian Anthony Smith in his book *The Ethnic Revival* (1981). Here Smith defines an ethnic group as a social group whose members have the following four characteristics:

(a) share a sense of common origins

(b) claim a common and distinctive history and destiny

(c) possess one or more dimensions of collective cultural individuality

(d) feel a sense of unique solidarity.[4]

I have no objection to Statistics New Zealand adopting this definition; the problem is that by allowing census respondents to report membership in more than one ethnic group they are clearly departing from it.

This becomes clear if we consider the following: While it might be possible for a person to be a member of two or more ethnic groups in respect to characteristics (a) and (c) in the above definition (especially where origin is thought of in terms of ancestry, and 'collective cultural individuality' is thought of in terms of cultural heritage), how can a person claim two or more distinct common histories and destinies, or feel two or more senses of unique solidarity? Only by ignoring these more political and subjective dimensions of ethnicity and reducing it to a nominal identity determined solely by ancestry and cultural heritage could the notion of multiple ethnic group membership be sustained.

It is clear then, that while Statistics New Zealand ostensibly adopts a definition of ethnic group that would be broadly acceptable to most anthropologists and historians, that which it operationalises in the census through the manner of its questioning is something entirely different. It is a very narrow 'descent/heritage-based' conception devoid of any aspect of political consciousness. What the census constructs, then, is not ethnic groups at all, but racial categories. [5]

TWO STUDIES OF MAORI/NON-MAORI SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITY

In his paper 'Counting Maori' Gould takes the census categories of `Sole Maori' and 'Mixed Maori' and compares them in terms of their indicators of socio-economic performance. Then, on the grounds that the 'Mixed Maori' category scores higher than the 'Sole Maori'

category he proposes the hypothesis that 'Degree of `Maoriness', whether this is conceived in biological or in ethnic terms, forms a continuum, position on which is itself a determinant of socioeconomic performance' (Gould, 2000:13).

Several things can be said about this hypothesis. Firstly, if the expression 'degree of `Maoriness" is conceived biologically, then the hypothesis is a straightforward racial one of the type that has long been scientifically discredited. If, on the other hand, 'degree of `Maoriness" is conceived in ethnic terms, then the hypothesis is grounded in a conception of ethnicity that anthropology moved away from in the 1960s (see Barth, 1969:11) – as something measurable in terms of degree of conformity to objectified cultural traits. In both cases the hypothesis represents outmoded and discredited ways of thinking.

Elsewhere in his paper Gould (2000:9) describes the 'mixed Maori/European population' as 'a continuum ranging from those who are almost Sole Maori to others who are almost Sole Europeans'. This is not an uncommon conception, but along with the notion 'degree of `Maoriness" it belongs to the discourse of 'race', not ethnicity, and Gould's whole discussion needs to be assessed in this light.

In the second of our two studies, Simon Chapple, economist and Chief Research Analysts with the Ministry of Social Policy, arrives at a completely different conclusion from that of Gould. He analyses socio-economic indicators from a variety of sources to demonstrate that there is a high rate of variation within the 'Maori Ethnic Group', and a high degree of overlap between 'Maori' and 'non-Maori' (Chapple, 2000:107-110). From this he concludes that being Maori is a poor predictor of socio-economic outcomes, and that ethnicity explains little in terms of socio-economic variances (p.108). He argues that differences in socio-economic outcomes between Maori and non-Maori can best be explained by the over-representation of Maori among the poorer social classes (Chapple, 2000:113), a fact that he says can also be explained economically.

But what conception of ethnicity is behind this conclusion? Ostensibly, Chapple (2000:114) describes the Maori ethnic group as a `recent historical construct' with a membership dependent upon the `rewards, both material and psychic, from belonging to the group'. This is an acceptable contemporary anthropological conception of ethnicity, but when it comes to determining how discrete the Maori ethnic group is, for purposes of comparing it with others, Chapple reverts to the outmoded pre-1960s culturalist definition of an ethnic group as something defined by social and cultural exclusiveness. He concludes that because Maori 'live in close interaction with other ethnic groups, have no exclusive livelihood, no exclusive language, possess no exclusive customs, and no exclusive religion ... [and] have a history of very high rates of exogamy' (Chapple, 2000:103). Maori do not exist as a discrete ethnic group, and so he dismisses ethnicity as a possible determinant of their socio-economic characteristics.

In the final analysis it is only a select group of Maori, not the Maori as a whole, who he says have socio-economic problems. The problem group is described as being 'sole' Maori with low literacy, poor education, and living in geographical regions with a high Maori concentration, probably with sub-cultural associations with benefit dependency, sole parenthood, early natality, drug and alcohol abuse, physical violence, and illegal cash cropping (Chapple 2000:115). This description appears to signal the importation of the 'underclass' concept into New Zealand social policy analysis, a concept with as invidious a history, and as dubious a validity as that of `race'.[6]

What can we make of these two studies? In one, ethnicity is seen as a determinant of socio-economic performance; in the other it is not. How can these differences be explained? In my view, the explanation lies not in their different data sets, nor in their different analytical methodologies, but in their different conceptions of 'ethnic group'. Gould conceives of ethnic groups as populations varying in their conformity to objectified biological or cultural traits, and this leads him to construct his racial hypothesis. Chapple on the other hand conceives of ethnic groups as discrete socio-cultural entities, and on the grounds that the 'Maori Ethnic Group' is not discrete in these

terms he dismisses ethnicity as a factor in its socio-economic outcomes. From an anthropological perspective, neither of these conceptions of ethnic group is acceptable, and nor can be any conclusions that are derived from them.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF ETHNIC GROUP

In social anthropology, the term ethnic group has, since Barth (1969), been used to describe a form of social organisation.[7] In Barth's terms, an ethnic group is a collectivity of people who use an identity determined by origin and background to categorise themselves and others for the purpose of interaction (Barth, 1969:13-14). Circumstances giving rise to the formation of ethnic groups have been found throughout the world since the 1950s, and were brought about by the processes of decolonisation, urbanisation and migration. These processes brought culturally different populations into contact with one another in new social environments. There, people from one background were forced to compete with people from other backgrounds for their means of livelihood, for the assertion of their customary ways, and for access to state resources. In this situation, people tended to look to those with whom they had something in common, upon which they could build relationships of mutual support. They looked for similarities of appearance, language, custom, or religion; and they used these shared characteristics to build a sense of common identity. It was not the case that these identities already existed; they had to be built, constructed anew with a view to aiding in the pursuit of new social, economic, and political objectives. Eric Wolf (1994:6) captures the emergent quality of ethnic groups when he describes them as social entities that arise and define themselves as against other social entities also engaged in the process of development and self-definition.

From an anthropological perspective, ethnic groups are not reified bundles of biological or cultural traits - they are not 'races', They are forms of social organisation that have emerged from the contingencies of modem political circumstances. They are relational - even oppositional - groups that define themselves relative to others in terms

of some signifying cultural difference that the members themselves have chosen as emblematic of their identity. One does not have to exhibit a determinate range of cultural traits to be a member of an ethnic group. Membership is defined by one's commitment to the goals of the group, and by other members' acceptance of you. Nor do ethnic groups have to be exclusive in their social and cultural interactions (as Chapple [2000] assumes); it is social and cultural interaction with other ethnic groups that gives rise to ethnic groups and the ethnicity that is their differentiating group ideology.

How might the relationship between ethnic group membership and socio-economic performance be studied in terms of this perspective? It would require a more ethnographic approach.

TOWARD AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CLASS AND ETHNICITY

While ethnicity is clearly a matter of subjectivity, a person's ethnic group membership cannot be discerned simply by asking them. Ethnic group membership is a matter of social engagement. A person's ethnic group membership can be discerned only by observing their social interactions, and if we want to know how a person's ethnic group membership relates to their 'socio-economic performance', to 'socio-economic outcomes', or, as it could also be put, their class position, then it would be best to abandon simplistic notions of one-way causality and adopt a more dialectical approach.

Class and ethnic group membership are not separate characteristics, one of which can be assumed to have a determining affect upon the other. They are interrelated dimensions of social interaction, each partially defining the scope of the other. A person's class position can be as much a determinant of their ethnic group membership as their ethnic group membership can be of their class position. At the group level, both class and ethnicity are products of unequal power relations. They arise within the context of relations of social power, and work, sometimes in complimentary and sometimes in contradictory ways, to alter or reproduce those relations.[8]

If this conception of class and ethnicity, as dialectically related dimensions of social interaction and group power, was adopted, then it is likely that ethnicity would seen as coming to the fore among those social classes for whom some material advantage might be envisaged in them identifying ethnically and engaging in ethnically organised action. Alternatively, a commitment to ethnic identity might be seen to weaken where alternative avenues for pursuing material advantage become available, through, for example, the revalorisation of class or tribal identities. We could expect to find different dynamics occurring at different times in different places according to different historical and regional circumstances. It should come as no surprise that the salience of ethnicity might change from time to time and from place to place, for ethnicity is a subjective phenomenon attuned to changing local and global conditions. The object of studying the relationship of ethnic group membership to class should not be to prove or disprove abstract causal relationships between reified statistical constructs (as Gould and Chapple attempt to do), but to understand concrete social processes and real life experiences. This would allow us to assess the practical advantages or disadvantages of adopting ethnic forms of group organisation as opposed to other forms, in different social circumstances and according to different social goals.

CONCLUSION

From an anthropological perspective, neither of the two studies that have been reviewed in this paper can be said to be discussing ethnic groups in any real sense. What they are discussing are statistical constructs derived from highly subjective and arbitrary processes of data collection and analysis. The roots of these constructs lie in the census attempt to enumerate a subjective identity. But dependent as it is upon respondents' self-identifications, and not knowing what respondents understand by 'ethnic group membership', the meaning of what the census enumerates cannot be known. The problem is exacerbated by the census option of reporting membership in more than one ethnic group. This not only contradicts Statistics New Zealand's own definition of ethnic group, and steers census respondents toward a very narrow 'descent/heritage-based' conception of ethnicity, but also involves the Department in the arbitrary

reallocation of respondents' answers. When analysts come to interpret the data resulting from these arbitrary and contradictory processes they impose their own definitions of ethnic group, thereby adding yet another layer of subjectivity to the mix. The whole process is subjective and arbitrary from start to finish.

There may be no solution to this problem. It emerges from trying to quantitatively measure and analyse a subjective identity. But some of the distortion resulting from this process could be lessened if the question on ethnic group membership was asked in a different way. The option of multiple ethnic group membership should be abandoned and the model of the census question on religious affiliation should be adopted, offering respondents a choice between exclusive categories. Some people might object to this form of questioning on the grounds that it forces them to make uncomfortable choices, but that is what ethnicity sometimes does, and the only alternative is to leave Statistics New Zealand to make the choice for them. Finally, the question on ethnic group membership should include the option 'None', for not all people are members of ethnic groups. To assume otherwise is to impose a racial conception of ethnicity.

It is unlikely that these suggestions would be found acceptable by Statistics New Zealand. The users of New Zealand's ethnic statistics are far too wedded to the current racialised conception of ethnicity for them to countenance such a change. But until such a change is made all discussions of ethnic groups derived from New Zealand Census statistics need to be treated with the utmost caution and scepticism. Only when the concept of ethnic group is grasped in its anthropological meaning as a form of social organisation, and clearly distinguished from the racialised conception promoted by the census will the role of ethnicity in New Zealand society be properly understood.

NOTES

[1] The article is reputed to have had a direct influence on the Labour Government's redirection of its "Closing the Gaps" policy away from an emphasis on Maori disadvantage toward a focus on general inequalities. It has also been quoted favourably by the leader of the National Party in support of that party's goal of removing all favourable treatment of Maori (Address by Don Brash to Orewa Rotary Club, *The New Zealand Herald,* 27 January 2004).

[2] In the 1996 Census Questionnaire the options were: New Zealand Maori, New Zealand European or Pakeha, other European (English, Dutch, Australian, Scottish, Irish, other), Samoan, Cook Island Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Chinese, Indian, other (such as Fijian, Korean). For 'other', respondents were asked to print their ethnic group (s). In the 2001 Census Questionnaire the choices were: New Zealand European, Maori, Samoan, Cook Island Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Chinese, Indian, Other (such as Dutch, Japanese, Tokelauan).

[3] In the 2001 census questionnaire the question was worded as follows: "Which ethnic group do you belong to? Mark the space or spaces which apply to you".

[4] This definition was still being used in 2001 (Statistics New Zealand, 2001, Definitions and Questionnaires: 12) preceded by the statement "Ethnicity is the ethnic group or groups that people identify with or feel they belong to. Thus, ethnicity is self-perceived and people can belong to more than one ethnic group. Ethnicity is a measure of cultural affiliation, as opposed to race, ancestry, nationality or citizenship". In the 1996 Census the question on ethnic groups was introduced by the statement "This question is about the ethnic group or groups (cultural groups) you belong to or identify with. It is not asking about nationality or citizenship". Strangely though, many of the options and examples offered are national.

[5] The difference between groups and categories can be described as follows: "A group is rooted in processes of internal definition, while a category is externally defined.... [W]hereas social groups define themselves, their name, their nature and their boundary, social categories are identified, defined and delineated by others" (Jenkins, 1994:200-1). While the census bases its enumeration of 'ethnic group membership' on self-identification, the options provided for respondents to identify with are administratively selected. This administrative channelling of self-identification combines with the administrative steering of identity considerations towards the criteria of descent and inherited culture (rather than conscious political commitment to shared history, destiny and solidarity). The

result is the classification of the population into classes that have a far greater resemblance to 'racial categories' than to 'ethnic groups'.

[6] For competing conservative and liberal views on the 'underclass' concept see Murray (1984) and Wilson (1987). For a discussion by an anthropologist see Maxwell (1993).

[7] This overview of the anthropological conception of ethnic group has been constructed from a reading of Banks, (1996), Cohen, (1978), Edksen, (1993), and Jenkins, (1986).

Examples of the approach described here can be found in Bourgois(1988:329-331), O'Brien, (1986), Wolf (1982:379-381).

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